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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION REPORT - Iraq Islam - Democracy -
Europe Energy War - Suez Merger
PARIS - Tuesday, February 28, 2006

(A) SUBJECTS COVERED IN TODAY'S REPORT:

Iraq
Islam - Democracy - Europe
Energy War - Suez Merger

B) SUMMARY OF COVERAGE:

A majority of front pages are devoted to the concept of "economic patriotism" in connection with the Suez-Gaz de France merger/cum privatization. While La Croix offers its pages as a platform for a debate "for or against" economic patriotism between industry captains and union members, Le Monde criticizes France for "ignoring Europe." In its editorial on the energy war, Le Monde recalls Putin's stance with Ukraine and Europe's lack of unity. (See Part C) In popular right-of-center France Soir, Thomas Cantaloube reports: "the Americans have no hang ups when it comes to blocking undesirable takeovers." Financial La Tribune notes that financial markets are "perplexed" by the government's attitude, while economic Les Echos reports that "The Suez-EDF Merger Elicits Strong Reactions in Europe" but leads with PM Villepin's first reversal on the unemployment front, with figures for January slightly higher, up .7%. Le Figaro devotes its lead to the gang leader arrested in Abidjan in connection with the abduction and murder of the young Jewish man, Illan Halimi. Le Figaro's second front-page story is devoted to the controversy surrounding the role of Germany before the military intervention in Iraq. While Pierre Bocev reports on this "politically delicate" affair for Berlin, Philippe Gelie reports on Washington's concerns about "civil war in Iraq." (See Part C)

Le Figaro carries an op-ed on Islam and democracy, where the author analyzes democracy as an electoral process and democracy as culture. (See Part C)

Much continues to be written about the spread of Avian Flu in France as well as on the first vaccination campaigns of ducks and geese in departments where dead poultry has been diagnosed with the H5N1 virus. Trade Minister Christine Lagarde announced yesterday that "some twenty countries have decided an embargo against importing poultry and foie gras from France" but these, she added, "represent only 5% of France's annual exports."

Popular France Soir makes an early start on next week's Women's Day and devotes its lead to Segolene Royal, "the socialist Representative who could become President," and Francoise de Panafieu, the UMP candidate that can threaten Paris Mayor Delanoë in the next election. The headline reads: "These Women Are Dynamite" while editorialist Serge Faubert compares them to "the new Amazons, incensed by the public, but annoying to their party's head honchos."

(C) SUPPORTING TEXT/BLOCK QUOTES:

Iraq

"Washington Embarrassed by Threat of Civil War in Iraq"
Philippe Gelie in right-of-center Le Figaro (02/28): "Most experts are predicting a slowdown in U.S. troop withdrawal. As much from reflex as from a lack of options, the Bush administration is hiding its head in the sand following the explosion of the mosque in Samarra. Once again, not changing a thing is seen in Washington as the best strategy. Embarrassment appears to be permeating the corridors of the Bush administration whose margin of maneuver remains narrow. While touring the Middle East, Secretary Rice acknowledged that the situation was 'extremely grave and delicate' but did not expound on a solution. Experts agree on one thing: the American calendar has been upset by the recent violence, and salvation, according to them, lies in a strong U.S. presence remaining in Iraq."

"Berlin Said to Have Given Bush the Keys to Baghdad"

Pierre Bocev in right-of-center Le Figaro (02/28): "While the allegations made by the New York Times have been rejected by the German government's spokesman, the situation remains politically delicate for a nation that espoused a 'policy of peace.' But Merkel's new government has been saying that Germany was not as opposed to the Americans as it said it was."

Islam - Democracy - Europe

"Islamists, Democracy, France and Europe"

Zaki Laidi of the European Center for International Research (CERI) in right-of-center Le Figaro (02/28): "There are three approaches to the Middle East and democracy. The cultural stance sees democracy as a luxury imported from the West and whose so-called virtues will be exploited by Islamic extremists. The realistic American approach called the Kissinger doctrine, adopted in France under the name 'Chevenement doctrine,' believes that stability is the key word and that it is better to have an authoritarian secular regime rather than an Islamic extremist regime, even if democratically elected. Then there is the Bush approach, which believes that the absence of democracy in the Muslim world explains its lower social rank, and favors imposing democracy, including through force. Democracy has two dimensions which are often confused: democracy as a process and democracy as culture. The former is the condition for any democracy and does not exist in the Muslim Arab world, except in Turkey. Democracy as culture requires internalizing a number of precepts. The opposition between the French and the Americans over the dilemma of importing democracy must be overcome. Democracy does not resolve all, but without democracy nothing can be resolved. In this context, America's failure in Iraq must not lead us to believe that we were right. The old French belief that an authoritarian regime is better than an Islamic regime is absurd and counter productive. Europe needs to acknowledge that there is a problem of democracy in the Arab-Muslim world and that the lack of pluralism impedes development. It must find a middle of the road approach, away from the 'Chevenement doctrine' but without imitating the ineffective 'Bush doctrine.' France has a responsibility in this matter: first because our diplomacy has been complacent towards these regimes, but also because France enjoys a certain credibility in that part of the world."

Energy War - Suez Merger

"Nationalism"

Left-of-center Le Monde in its editorial (02/28): "When Vladimir Putin shut off the gas going to Ukraine, the EU discovered it lacked unity to deal with Russia, its number one energy provider, thus putting itself at the mercy of Russia. This is why everyone believes that Europe's energy security requires the construction of pan-European groups rather than 'national groups.' Giving up on Europe is bad for the consumer; it is bad for Europe. In 1998, the just as strategic defense industry's salvation came from the creation of EADS. The same must be done for the energy industry."

"Old and Musty"

Jean-Michel Thenard in left-of-center Liberation (02/28): "Once again Europe has suffered a harsh blow when it comes to the EU and its industrial policy. Rather than feeling threatened by Italy's take-over attempt of Suez, it would have been better to work on a transnational alliance to build a European energy giant. Instead, France's 'economic patriotism' signals a France on the defensive and afraid of competition. Villepin's France may well begin to look old and smell musty."

"Europe Loses to Provincialism"

Guillaume Goubert in Catholic La Croix (02/28): "The only certainty in the confusion of the Suez deal is that Europe has lost. What can be targeted as 'economic patriotism' at the national level, is more like provincialism when measured at the level of a continent. The objective for member nations should be to favor cooperative alliances in major industrial sectors, as was the case with EADS in aerospace. When our national 'giants' become the target of hungry groups from other continents, we will regret our lack of European patriotism." STAPLETON